Amelie von Wulffen

Ausstellungen / Exhibitions 2018 – 2022

Kunsthalle Bern
Etablissement d'en face, Brüssel / Brussels

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O.T. / Untitled, 2003
Fotografie (Mehrfachbelichtung) / Photograph (multiple exposure), 100 × 176 cm Auflage / Edition 3+1

O.T. / Untitled, 2006
Acryl, Aquarell, Fotografien auf Papier / Acrylic, watercolour, photographs on paper, 80 × 82 cm

O.T. / Untitled, 2011
Aquarell, Tusche auf Papier / Watercolour, Indian ink on paper 21 × 30 cm

O.T. / Untitled, 2006
Acryl, Drucke auf Papier / Acrylic, prints on paper, 224 × 150 cm

The sale of the pictures has continued to be a satisfaction to the Wolf-Man[1]

Tonio Kröner

In spite of the colours of a rainbow, her face is like a wet weekend, a picture of misery. In a series of colourful lines and segments, the face at the centre of Amelie von Wulffen's *Regensburg* (2018–20, page 71) distorts into abstraction. As in the case of Edvard Munch's famous painting, the subject's emotional state, concentrated in the face, extends melodramatically into the world of the painting. Even though fear, grief and death are invoked in *Regensburg*, the emotional turmoil we encounter seems to be less Munch and more an enduring *tristesse* – the inveterate sadness of everyday crises of identity and existence. A green-brown-grey mush of paint envelops the face. On the one hand, the colour solidifies into a coat, which, together with the head, makes up a half-length figure. On the other hand, it coalesces into a figuration of two cars. The Volkswagen Passat's nameplate, painted in section, is a hint to the possible time and place, namely the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s. The featureless headlight eye and the crisp outlines of the cars contrast with the face. They make it glow and highlight its brown-green silhouette blurred with the world. However, despite their comparatively stable shapes, the cars resemble the face. They are also painted patchily; the application of paint flattens them into abstract painting and allows glimpses of the primed canvas beneath. The coat, on the other hand, appears voluminous and weighty even without an outline. Its darkish green tone, suggesting loden cloth, provides the head with a body and lends the painting stability. It is a form of armour against prevailing environmental influences and a structural plinth for the expressive painting of the face.

In *Untitled* (2003, page 166), we actually see painted faces. The large-format, multiple exposure photograph shows von Wulffen's face in three aspects. Her skin is painted with coloured areas and patterns, similar to the painted face in *Regensburg*. However, these sections are more ornamental in the photograph, less expressive. Except for the area around the eyes, they do not follow the shape of the face; they are superimposed on it and allow it to recede in favour of the painting. The photographs were taken in front of an equally ornamental mural by the artist, with the effect that the painted areas on the faces fuse with the background.
By painting her face with abstract ornamental shapes and blending it with one of her murals, von Wulffen transfers her mode of expression into a painting as decoration, as exuberant ornamentation. Her face and the painting on it become another motif in the maelstrom of patterns in her art and in the world. The presence of ornament is momentous. Through the deconstruction of facial expression and painting into a decorative object, the duality of figure and ground shifts to a form of equivalence in the photograph. This coalition of disparate parts also defines von Wulffen's painting collages, which she made at the same time; from 1998 to 2010, these paintings were executed on paper and often adorned with pasted photographs.
In *Untitled* (2006, page 166), five photographs of fine glassware were pasted onto a sheet of paper painted with a sometimes opaque, sometimes streaky, glazed red wash. The fragile, eccentrically shaped objects with delicate markings resemble the painted faces of the multiple exposures. They were photographed against a black background and then surrounded with patchy black paint. The painterly marks overlap the glassware objects and diffuse into the overall composition, linking them to it. And as if as the obverse of completion, the colour covers the entire format like an amorphous

1 Muriel Gardiner, 'The Wolf-Man Grows Older', *The Wolf-Man and Sigmund Freud* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 377. The following essay, at the behest of Anna Gritz and the artist herself, derives from a lecture on Amelie von Wulffen's survey show held at the KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, in April 2021.

film of dirt. The composition finds a correspondence of its constitutive elements in the ornamentation of the glassware and the decorative coloured areas and combines them into a new object, the painting itself.
The photographs of the glassware can be seen as an equivalent to the photographic self-portraits. Von Wulffen creates both as ornaments in a similar way. Thus, the expression of her own face corresponds to that of an object and loses its defined contours. Expression does not dissolve in this network of ornaments, nor does it insist on the stability of an identity. These inconsistent images, oscillating between figuration and abstraction, actually begin – in individual cases – to take on the form of undefined objects. Von Wulffen's carpentered loungers serve as supports for ornamental paintings, but at the same time, act as pedestals for the upholstery covered with patterned fabrics and frames for drawings lying in drawers.

From 2011 onwards, these masterfully inconsistent paintings are given a counterpoint: a series of cartoons with everyday objects and pieces of fruit as protagonists. In contrast to the painting collages, the cartoons are drawn in pure colours, clear outlines and comprehensible pictorial settings. The ink and watercolour drawings take no account of human scale, as did the loungers and brushstrokes, formats and motifs of the collages. And in particular, they do not show people, only anthropomorphised entities. It seems that only the abandonment of the human component in favour of animate things renders possible consistent, cogently self-contained figures, pictorial spaces and narratives. The cartoons recall Ernst Kreidolf's and Sibylle von Olfers's illustrations for children's books. Their illustrations radiated an amiable sense of security in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But this benign world of flowers, insects and anthropomorphic beings was also endowed with a weird, uncanny undercurrent.
The composite, enclosed silhouette of Wulffen's cartoons is at the cost of another abstraction: the fact that one is but a banana, a paintbrush or a wine glass in a cartoon world. Everything is abstract there, everything is made of the same material. The equivalence of the ornament takes full effect, the Self can shift unheeded from a paintbrush to a wine glass and a dispute can congeal both in the relation of potatoes to tomatoes and of white sausage to a pretzel. The sustained inconsistency in the correspondence between the glassware, the self-portraits and the brushstrokes of the painting collages coalesces in the cartoons. These anthropomorphised entities lure us down the rabbit hole of the oneiric. It is the nature of dream-work to combine disparate content into a single unity.[2] In a similar way to dreams, the cartoons render the inconsistent consistent through concentration and transference. And in this unified form, their humanless space stands vis-à-vis the inconsistent, humanising areal of the painting collages.
Two reclining wine glasses are channel-hopping in front of the TV. One of them is casually flicking cigarette ash into an ashtray and looking contemptuously at the viewer from out of the cartoon, while the other is desultorily watching the telly, puffing away on a cigarette with the remote control in its hand. Football is on, played by humans! So people do actually feature in von Wulffen's cartoon world after all? As a telly programme? And because there's only proper rubbish on TV, are we viewers of the cartoon – as the humans opposite the wine glass – even worthy of a contemptuous sideways glance?

Visitors to von Wulffen's survey show at Berlin's KW Institute for Contemporary Art were likewise assayed in a similarly derogatory fashion. The gaze belongs to a life-size object made of chicken wire and papier-mâché (*Untitled*, 2020, page 107). The brown-painted figure stands next to a tree stump; it has two arms, no legs and a head with a suggested mouth, nose, ears and pupil-less green eyes. While the paint lends the adjacent tree stump a bark-like texture, it turns the figure next to it into a faecal sausage in human form. It looks every bit like the Wolf-Man's grown-up 'faecal child'. The Wolf-Man is one of the showpieces of Freudian psychoanalysis. On the basis of

2 Cf. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis* translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (London: The Hogarth Press, 1973), p. 125.

this case, Sigmund Freud developed his theory of the relevance of infantile neurosis for later adult mental disorders. According to Freud's analysis, the Wolf-Man, who owes his name to a dream about a wolf ('wolf's dream'), developed the fantasy of giving birth to himself as a faecal child. The stool he passes in a seminal moment of his childhood becomes a new child, in the form and substance of which he is reborn into a happier life. The faecal child is also a gift to the parents, in the case of the Wolf-Man, a present to his father. In the frame of psychoanalysis, excrement is the first valuable substance that a child can produce and give away: as Freud famously put it, it is the child's first gift. The gift, however, means renouncing the autoerogenic stimulation of the intestinal tract by faecal matter and is, thus, the model for castration. This psychic dynamic shifts in the course of life to money, the other valuable substance, which is required to be kept free of libidinous influences and regulated rationally.[3]
And so the grown-up faecal child, as a wholly three-dimensional cartoon oneiric figure, is standing there in von Wulffen's exhibition next to a felled tree (!) in the middle of a flea market. The figure is seemingly selling various figurines displayed on painted, wooden, plinth-like boxes of variable dimensions – shells, the skeletons of other sea creatures, dried roots, clay and damaged objects. At the same time, the figure also seems to be peddling the canvases and panel paintings hanging in the vicinity, including *Regensburg*.
The staging recalls the humour of the cartoons – a faecal sausage selling sultanas to potatoes and glasses of red wine. But it is also a continuation of Wulffen's exhibition stagings with ornamental murals. Her individual works, limited in their formats, have always had to assert themselves in their respective exhibition contexts against an expansive overall exhibition design. Thus, the faecal child can also be seen as a self-contained figure and, simultaneously – as the vendor of the small sculptures and paintings – spreads into the overall installation, merging and connecting with it. It has smeared the walls with (shit) brown paint and most of the paintings evince brown undertones or traces of brown. Each painting and sculpture is an instrumental part of a world that cannot be represented in its entirety and seems to be made of the same libidinous material: brown paint, excrement, money. But each element is, at the same time, an individual star, a self-contained unit in the staging of the sale.
The contradictoriness of being part of an inconsistent world and simultaneously a self-contained object has manifested itself in von Wulffen's work over the last six years, especially in her canvases and panel paintings. In *Am Kühlen Tisch*, a comic by von Wulffen first published in 2014, her drawn alter ego – in conversation with Francisco de Goya – suggests that bourgeois panel painting is a dismemberment of the world. It dissects the world and the perception of the viewer into pieces and is itself only a section.[4] This section of the inconsistent world, however, has a closed form. Von Wulffen shows that this closed form of painting, although traditionally preferred, does not have to be exclusively objective and rational. In her work, it is, in particular, the encapsulated realm of cartoons and dreams. The fragmented expression of the painting collages via the cartoons arrived at a semi-stable form in her panel paintings. In the process, it became monstrous, the flowing ornament giving way to claustrophobic, rustic wood-panelled farmhouses and the cartoons's diverse cast dividing itself up into idealised humans and monsters.

For example, one of seven piglet children painted in crude, bright pink in *Musische Mutter* (2019, page 81) presents several small brown piles on a plate to a human woman. The 'chocolates' are decorated with a little banner that reads 'Für Mama' (For Mama). The eponymous figure of the artistic mother recalls Jan Vermeer's *Lute Player at the Window* (1664) and is painted in delicate beige-reddish flesh tones in contrast to the almost Day-Glo pink of the piglets. The anthropomorphised piglet offers its lovingly decorated, precious substance to its human mother as a sign of love and requests reciprocation. However, the archaic gift seems unable to bridge the gap between it and the mother with her way of expressing feelings via cultural accomplishment. The crude piglets and the humanistic, human mother share the

3 Cf. Sigmund Freud, 'From the History of an Infantile Neurosis' (1918), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (1917–1919), pp. 1–124, here p. 72, p. 81f, p. 102ff.
4 Cf. Amelie von Wulffen, 'Am kühlen Tisch', in Anna Gritz, ed., *Amelie von Wulffen. Alle Comics 2011–2020* (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2020), p.150.

same undefined visual space held together by a framework painted in thick brown planes suggesting walls. But they remain separate. The Vermeer allusion aligns itself with a series of other human depictions of celebrities, such as the recurring face of John Travolta in *Der Nackte im Park* (2011–18, page 47), teenagers from a sex education magazine (*Petting* 1+2, 2017, page 12) and the artist's family members painted from photographs *Wer hätte das gedacht* (2020, page 69). And like the anthropomorphised pigs, these ideals of humanity are juxtaposed in von Wulffen's paintings with monstrous cats, mythical creatures, deformed humans and piles of excrement.

The piglet proffering the 'chocolates' is wearing a technicolour dreamcoat, recalling the luminous face in *Regensburg*, both tonally and in its design. If we consider both the piglet and the face as shifted self-portraits of the artist, von Wulffen sides here with the faecal child, the abstract, the outsider, the crudely pasted, the fragmented and the damaged. In *Untitled* (2020, page 91), she dons a loden cape in the manner of Rumpelstiltskin. It is made of the self-same fabric as the coat in *Regensburg*, which resembles the painting in its composition and was hung opposite it at KW. In this instance with a finely modulated countenance, similar to *Musische Mutter*, the former Pope Benedict XVI in *Bayerische Kindheiten* (2020, page 68) or *Michael Ende und die Dissidenten* (2019, page 82), she sides with people. The artist walks between worlds in her paintings. The voluminous cape seems to belong to an elderly white man who presumably no longer needs it. He is lying in his cot, either dead or asleep. The frontal view of the tenebrous timber-clad chamber, with its view of a mountain range on the rear wall – suggesting either a window or a landscape painting – is also the man's bedroom. Loden garments, the farmhouse parlour and mountain panorama motifs are synonymous with the brown hued legacy of Germano-bourgeois painting and handicraft that von Wulffen has inherited. She stands with splayed legs in the centre of the composition, her fixed gaze filling the room and the format. Through her specific mode of self-portrait, she deconstructs this legacy, both as a motif and as artistic practice. She introduces the big themes – unresolved Nazi terror and disastrous anthropogenic climate change – into the scene and onto the stage via the monstrosity of everyday crises of identity and existence. She opens up her heritage to the undigested detritus of individual experience and objective description.
Thus, in *Untitled* (2020), the focus shifts from the artist's face to the loden cape. It is the actual protagonist in the painting. Its crumpled folds are one with the contours of the wood panelling and landscape, its internal structure is smudged and the artist's monstrous skeletal fingers shine spectrally through it. The momentarily beautiful yet terrifying relationship between the both solid, stolid coat (and all that it implies) and the ambivalent face in *Regensburg* is reversed. And it is no longer apparent what can be attributed to inconsistency or patchiness and what to roundedness, to a composite whole. From out of this psycho-scenario, the faecal child fumbles in its bum bag for loose change and eyes us up, checking whether we are just browsing or actually buying something.